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“Hanging up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners”: Virginia Woolf’s Biographical Essays

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I. Introduction

In “‘I am Christina Rossetti’”[1](1932), Virginia Woolf declares the nature of biography to be problematic by examining her experience of reading *The Life of Christina Rossetti*:

> Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank; all we have to do is to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the little figures—for they are rather under life size—will begin to move and to speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant, for they thought when they were alive that they could go where they liked; and as they speak we shall read into their sayings

1) As a review of *The Life of Christina Rossetti*, this essay was originally published in the *Nation & Athenaeum* on December 6 in 1930, and with variations, including the title in quotation marks, in the *New York Herald Tribune* on December 14 in 1930. It was later revised for the *Common Reader: Second Series*.

> all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different. (554)

As she reads the biography, Woolf finds the biography seized with "the old illusion" (554) that life can be classified according to chapter headings. For Woolf, it is absurd to assume that life can be arranged into patterns that are arbitrary and artificial. Woolf also sees that while traditional biographies pile up facts and documents to verify such patterns in the lives of people in the past, they fail to recreate their subjects as they really are.

Here, Woolf attacks traditional biographies. According to Woolf, nineteenth-century biographies elevated "Victorian worthies" to faultless figures of virtue. For her, these biographies have a "depressing similarity; [they are] very much overworked, very serious, very joyless, the eminent men appear to us to be, and already strangely formal and remote from us in their likes and dislikes" ("A Man with a View" 36). Striving for the essence of personality is what Woolf tries to achieve in biography and her modern fiction. Yet, Victorian biographers, like Sir Sidney Lee, the successor to her father as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *DNB*), get lost in endless labyrinths and the reader "rambling among unimportant trifles" ("'I am Christina Rossetti'" 557) dissipates enormous energy, not even knowing what the individual characteristics of the subject really are. Woolf claims that Victorian biographers have for the most part failed to capture the personality in their biographies stacked with facts.

As a modernist and particularly, a feminist, Woolf was eager to alter the conventional method and content of biographical writing. Woolf notes in "The New Biography" that the biographer's art has entered a new phase to capture the essence of a personality (476). Advocating new perspectives on life and, in consequence, on life-writing, she tries to find solutions to the generic and historical problems of traditional biography. In biographical essays Woolf devoted herself to find the lives of the obscure, particularly of women, silenced in the patriarchal society and ignored from traditional biographies. Many of Woolf's essays in the 1920s,

including *A Room of One's Own*, reveal her active engagement with biographical writing. Essays such as "The New Biography," "The Lives of the Obscure," and "Eliza and Sterne" not only illustrate Woolf's attitudes toward life and writing, but also demonstrate her concerns about women and history. This paper aims to examine Woolf's essays written in the 1920s, in particular her experiments with biographical writing that have rarely been discussed critically. These essays show that growing up as the daughter of the editor of the *DNB* to become a prominent modernist writer, Woolf scrutinizes biography throughout her career. In particular, her experiments with biography shine through many of her essays and establish her as an uncompromising feminist and great modernist.

II. Virginia Woolf and the New Biography

Woolf is very interested in "life-writing"[2] as she called it in her autobiographical memoir, "Sketchy of the Past." Since Woolf first anonymously contributed a review article to the women's page of the *Guardian*, a weekly newspaper for the clergy, in December 1904, she wrote "over a million words" of reviews in a career of almost forty years as a literary journalist (*Essays* 1: ix). The reviews mainly comprise short biographical synopses of writers and literary comments on books and biographies. Woolf wrote two essays on biography, "The New Biography" and "The Art of Biography," which later became influential in biographical criticism. In addition, she published three books[3] styled as

2) The term "biography" is of Greek origin, which means "life-writing," from *bios* "life" and *graphia* "writing." In this paper, "life-writing" is used for "biography" to focus on Woolf's concern for the organic relations between life and writing. For Woolf, each element constitutes an organic part of the world for the other.

3) *Orlando: A Biography* is usually characterized as a novel inspired by the life of Vita Sackville-West. *Flush: A Biography* is a cross-genre work comprising fiction as a "stream of consciousness," narrated by Flush, a dog, and non-fiction in the sense of telling the story of the owner of the dog, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Roger Fry: A Biography* is

biographies, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *Flush: A Biography* (1933), and *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940). She wrote a great number of diaries[4] and an enormous number of letters. She commenced her autobiography in the last two years of her life. Hermione Lee points out that biography is an incessant preoccupation of Woolf's essays, diaries, and fiction as well as her readings of history, her feminism, and politics (Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 4). For Woolf, biography was an exemplary form of combining history and imagination, fact and fiction, and served "as a testing ground for larger issues about art and life" (Cuddy-Keane 28). Biography might seem no different from other literary sub-genres, but it was a real issue for Woolf who is "one of the most professional, perfectionist, energetic, courageous, and committed writers in the language" (Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 4).

Woolf inherited her passion for biography from her father, Leslie Stephen. In 1885, because of a need for the British equivalent to the *Biographie Universelle*, the *DNB* was published by George Smith and edited by Leslie Stephen. The first edition of sixty-three volumes appeared in 1900[5] and contained 29,120 entries (Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 99). Stephen was editor of the *DNB* from 1882 to 1891; he edited the first 26 volumes and contributed 378 entries.[6] As part of this monument to Victorian industry, Stephen includes the lives of great men, and contrary to Sidney Lee for whom the lives of the mediocre conflict with biographic principles (Marcus, *Discourses* 97), Stephen embraces "minor heroes." These were naval captains, country vicars, teachers, merchants, sportsmen, and "more dubious

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Woolf's only biography where she depicts the life of her friend, Fry who was an artist, an art critic, and a member of the Bloomsbury Group.

4) When their house in London was bombed in the war, Virginia and Leonard Woolf had to remove their valuables to the country. Virginia was concerned about the twenty-four volumes of her diaries, "a great mass for my memoirs" (*Diaries* 5: 332). Leonard, in his Preface to *A Writer's Diary* (1954), writes, "When she died, she left 26 volumes of diary, written in this kind of book in her own hand" (vii).

5) Continually revised throughout the twentieth century, the *DNB* was significantly expanded, thoroughly revised, and published as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)* in 2004, in 60 volumes and online.

6) In recognition of this service to letters, he was knighted in 1902.

characters" such as "brothel-keepers, contortionists, gamblers, transvestites, and centenarians" (Lee, *Biography* 67). It is remarkable, as Laura Marcus asserts, that Stephen's concepts on biography and memoirs, particularly his "reconstruction of the lives of 'second-rate people,'" are closely linked up to Woolf's retrieval of the lives of the obscure, despite "the common perception that Woolf wholly rejected her father's biographical methods" (*Discourses* 98). Nevertheless, as Lee points out, in this collective national history, women represented "only 4% of the entries," because there were relatively few women in public life; wives and mothers were considered as mere belongings (67).

The entries in the *DNB* reflected the spirit of the late nineteenth-century and Woolf derived her concept of traditional biography from it. Biography portrays the lives of great men in history as examples for contemporaries or descendants. In patriarchal society, men determine what greatness is and whose lives must be recorded, using rigid dominant social standards and methods of reinforcing them. According to Georges Gusdorf, biography as a literary genre was "reviewed and corrected by the demands of propaganda and by the general sense of the age" (31). Similarly, Lee argues that biography is never just the personal story of an individual life: "It always has political and social implications" (*Biography* 63). The politics of nineteenth-century biography is, as Lee points out, closely connected with reinforcing a national story. At the beginning of the century, Britain was in the midst of unrest owing to great social change and political repression after the Napoleonic Wars. In this unstable period of transition, biography was used to consolidate a sense of social security. Heroic lives were recorded to inspire the youth of England, heighten their patriotism, and develop their imperial confidence and assertiveness (Lee 63). With the huge growth of the nineteenth-century biographical industry, the *DNB* was consistent with the national move to immortalize the lives of the great men of British history.

In this context, traditional biography is a literary version of male-centered culture. For Woolf, Victorian biographies, "dominated by the idea of goodness" ("The New Biography" 474), represented men "as they ought to be, for they are

husbands and brothers" ("Sterne" 281). Biographies were often written under the supervision of widows, friends, surviving relatives, and admirers. Therefore, Victorian biographies do not represent the personal life if that was inadequate to a purpose. Rather, they expound the common sense of the age of patriarchy through the portrayal of an individual life. Consequently, for Woolf, men in Victorian biographies appear to be "wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street—effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin" ("The Art of Biography" 182). Woolf asserts that the majority of Victorian biographies failed to bring the dead to life since they had labored to follow obediently every step of a noble hero. The personality was hampered and distorted by innumerable words. However, these tremendous documents survive and become monuments of the past consolidating the ideology of the patriarchy.

Woolf's "The New Biography" decisively rejects the old methods of Victorian biography. Woolf is acutely aware of the limitations of her Victorian predecessors as she notes in "The New Biography":

> [We] can assure ourselves by a very simple experiment that the days of Victorian biography are over. Consider one's own life; pass under review a few years that one has actually lived. Conceive how Lord Morley would have expounded them; how Sir Sidney Lee would have documented them; how strangely all that has been most real in them would have slipped through their fingers. (478)

Woolf realizes that Victorian biographies are not adequately equipped to capture "one's own life," as Lytton Strachey describes them in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*. He dislikes biographies "with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design" (6). As Woolf asserts that there is a need to change the characterization of fiction in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she argues for experiments in biography that embody the personality. Woolf finds them in

biographies written in the first decades of the twentieth-century, particularly those by her contemporaries Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson; she coined the term "the new biography" to refer to these experiments.

In her review of Harold Nicolson's *Some People*, entitled "The New Biography," Woolf defines the experimental method as follows. "Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible," she writes, "yet [the biographer] is now more than ever urged to combine them. For it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act" (478). Woolf urges biographers to use the novelist's method of "arrangement, suggestion, [and] dramatic effect" (478) to shed light on the private life, so that the personality of the subject is revealed. According to Woolf, truth of fact and truth of fiction are antagonistic; they destroy each other. Nevertheless, Nicolson's *Some People* shows that fiction mixed with fact can transmit personality very effectively. While Victorian biographies failed to achieve "the aim of biography," which Sir Sidney Lee describes as "the truthful transmission of personality," Woolf anticipates that modern biography will weld the antagonistic "granite-like solidity" of truth with the "rainbow-like intangibility" of personality into a seamless whole (473).

However, for Woolf, modern biography can barely furnish the "queer amalgamation of dream and reality" (478). She knows the danger of mixing fact and fiction because with one "incautious movement [. . .] the book will be blown sky high" (477). Where fact is mingled with imagination, "Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction" (478). Thus, Elena Gualtieri considers Woolf's modern biography an "impossible art [. . .] precariously balanced between irreconcilable possibilities" (349). As a genre situated at the liminal space between fact and fiction, biography represents for Woolf "a particular kind of synthesis" (Gualtieri 349); and yet, the distinction Woolf draws between fact and fiction is rigidly preserved. Since the new biography might be considered an impossible synthesis of antagonistic elements that destroy each other, Woolf argues that the truth of fact and the truth of fiction should be mixed "by using no more than a pinch of either"

(477). However, Woolf also affirms that the mix of fact and fiction stunts the growth of figures in *Some People*. The problem Woolf faces here is the nature of biography itself. The limitation is intrinsic to the art of biography, which Woolf strenuously attempts to resolve in her life-writing.

Similar to other genres in the early twentieth century, such as poetry and fiction, Woolf's new biography represents the modernity of the new era. In the essay "How It Strikes a Contemporary" (1923),[7] Woolf keenly perceives a change in the times. She writes, "We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale—the war, the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages—has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present" (238). Woolf and her contemporaries felt very conscious of being different from their predecessors, and one of the most important issues of the time among writers was originality. Their keen sense of novelty is derived from their different perception of reality, personality, and values. As the literary emblem of the spirit of the age, Victorian biography could not incorporate the biographer's sense of reality of the twentieth-century. Woolf claims that the biographer has ceased to be the chronicler; he is an "equal" to the subject, and the "point of view" is "altered" ("The New Biography" 475). The biographer should have his/her own point of view about the subject and preserve his/her freedom and right to independent judgment. In "The Art of Biography," she asks, "what is greatness? And what smallness?" (186). Woolf casts doubt on the fundamental assumptions underlying the hierarchical values of the Victorian age. For Woolf, life-writing reinterprets the established history of remarkable figures who embody the social virtues of the age.

Above all, it seemed to Woolf that "history is too much about wars; biography too much about great men" (*A Room of One's Own* 142). Since biography developed in eighteenth-century England and flourished in the nineteenth-century,

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7) Written for the *Times Literary Supplement* of April 5, 1923, the essay was revised for inclusion in the *Common Reader*. The title derives from Browning's poem in *Men and Women* (1855).

it mainly depicted great men. The lives of the obscure, particularly the lives of women, were excluded from biography, history, and literature as a matter of course. In "The Art of Biography," Woolf questions "whether the lives of great men only should be recorded" (186). As she comments in *Three Guineas*, "It is much to be regretted that no lives of maids [. . .] are to be found in the *Dictionary of National Biography*" (390-91). For Woolf, biography should "enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners" and the biographer should, "like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions," set up the new criteria for virtue ("The Art of Biography" 186). For Woolf, virtue in tune with the times consists in the lives of the obscure.

Woolf's passion for the lives of the obscure, which historians have long overlooked, is depicted as "the light it throws upon this dark and obscure chapter of human history" ("Two Women" 419). In "The Lives of the Obscure," Woolf positions herself as "a deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost" (119). She would shed light on the memoirs of country gentlemen and clergymen's widows in the obsolete, faded, out-of-date country library. Woolf personifies these memoirs as those who "sleep on the walls, slouching against each other as if they were too drowsy to stand upright" (118). For her, the lives of the obscure collapsed and faded away into the darkness of oblivion in books that nobody read and nobody disturbed for a long time. Woolf discovers "the nameless tombstones" (118) and brings the dead to life in her essay. As Woolf recalls the lives of the obscure from oblivion and bestows on them the attention of the reader in contemporary Britain, she enriches the history of England with "the fine mist-like substance of countless lives" (120).

In "The Lives of the Obscure," Woolf portrays the trivial details of the lives of the obscure, particularly women, who had so far never been seriously recorded in the documents of public life and had steadily been disregarded and forgotten from the pages of English history. The title is very suggestive because life-writing is typically not of the obscure, but of the memorable in history. Woolf discusses real people who lived in the past as the obscure; even in the case of the famous,

she particularly discusses women who were well-known in their time but became obscure in twentieth-century Britain. "The Lives of the Obscure" consists of three essays. The first, "Taylors and Edgeworths,"[8] concerns obscure villagers in Colchester in the 1800s. The second, "Laetitia Pilkington,"[9] describes the life of Pilkington (1712-1750), an eighteenth-century Irish poet whose memoirs reveal the personality and habits of Jonathan Swift. The third essay, "Miss Ormerod,"[10] concerns Eleanor Anne Ormerod (1828-1901), one of the most outstanding English entomologists of the latter-half of the nineteenth-century who found cheap and effective ways to annihilate crop-damaging insects. Each of the essays, published at different times in the early decades of the twentieth century, was later collected in *The Common Reader* in 1925 as "The Lives of the Obscure."

For Woolf, the lives of the obscure are found in memoirs, letters, and journals, which provide her with all kinds of "scenes" and enable her to appreciate the "aesthetic pleasure" ("Sterne" 280) of the art of biography. These fragmented scenes of the obscure that are scattered in the memoirs agglomerate together to form huge clusters, which reveal their particular truthfulness to life shared and experienced by many. Unlike great men who keep their identity separate, the lives of the unknown "merge into one another, their very boards and title-pages and frontispieces dissolving, and their innumerable pages melting into continuous years so that we can lie back and look up into the fine mist-like substance of countless lives, and pass unhindered from century to century, from life to life" (120). The obscure merge into one another and become a vehicle "thick with the star dust of innumerable lives" (121) which transmits their lives in their time into dynamic interrelations. Marcus affirms that "obscurity" is not a "negation" (*Discourses* 98) and that the disappearance of boundaries can be generative. The obscure are "the

8) "Taylors and Edgeworths" was originally published as "The Lives of the Obscure" in the *London Mercury* in January 1924, and slightly revised for inclusion in the *Common Reader*.

9) "Laetitia Pilkington" first appeared in the *Nation & Athenaeum*, June 30, 1923.

10) "Miss Ormerod" was first published in the *Dial*, New York, December 1924, and collected in the American edition of the *Common Reader* of May 1925.

repository of a kind of collective memory" (Marcus 99). Woolf recreates the histories of their lives; fragmented and uncertain, eccentric lives become their own histories in her essays.

Woolf's essays in which she reconstructs the histories of the obscure blur the lines between history, biography, and fiction. Because these obscure lives have little documentation, Woolf fills the empty spaces and fragmented scenes with her imagination. Woolf claims, "It is so difficult to keep, as we must with highly authenticated people, strictly to the facts [. . .] Certain scenes have the fascination which belongs rather to the abundance of fiction than to the sobriety of fact" (123-24). Woolf's essays on biographical writings are therefore characteristically situated between biography, history, and fiction in quite peculiar ways. In addition, Woolf does not use the traditional narrative as a literary device. For example, in "Taylors and Edgeworths" Woolf provides anecdotes about the lives of the obscure in Colchester in 1800 with very little linear narratives. Here is Fanny Hill, who got married to Captain M. in spite of the opposition of those around her:

> For years nothing more was heard of her. Then one night, when the Taylors had moved to Ongar and old Mr and Mrs Taylor were sitting over the fire, thinking how, as it was nine o'clock, and the moon was full, they ought, according to their promise, to look at it and think of their absent children, there came a knock at the door. Mrs Taylor went down to open it. But who was this sad, shabby-looking woman outside? 'Oh, don't you remember the Strutts and the Stapletons, and how you warned me against Captain M.? cried Fanny Hill, for it was Fanny Hill—poor Fanny Hill, all worn and sunk; poor Fanny Hill, that used to be so sprightly. (119-20)

In this scene, Woolf provides the fragmented anecdote instead of the linear story of Fanny Hill's life and makes the reader imagine how Fanny Hill has been doing for a long time since she got married to Captain M., wasting all her fortune and ruining her life. Similarly, Woolf presents Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817), an Irish author and incredibly energetic inventor in this dramatic scene:

> What is that enormous wheel, for example, careering downhill in Berkshire in the eighteenth century? It runs faster and faster; suddenly a youth jumps out from within; next moment it leaps over the edge of a chalk pit and is dashed to smithereens. This is Edgeworth's doing—Richard Lovell Edgeworth, we mean, the portentous bore. (121-22)

With the boisterous appearance of Richard Lovell Edgeworth in the scene, Woolf effectively reveals his distinctive personality: "meritorious, industrious, advanced," "[h]is brain raced. His tongue never stopped talking. He had married four wives and had nineteen children [. . .] His energy burst open the most secret doors and penetrated to the most private apartments" (122). Opening the pages of Woolf's essay the reader expects that the essay will present an in-depth story about Taylors and Edgeworths. However, Woolf depicts fragmented scenes of many lives—special moments no one else know about. These "moments of being," illustrated by Woolf, pierce the depths of the subject's personality, which Woolf explores with imaginative power to revive vividly the dead from their graves.

III. Virginia Woolf and Women's Life-Writing

Woolf's enthusiasm for the lives of the obscure and for marginal literary forms such as memoirs, letters, and journals are definitely focused on the lives of women. Lee claims that, for Woolf, life-writing is to write about feminism (13), because the obscure lives Woolf has a great passion for are mostly of women. Woolf regretted the obscurity of women and tried to find their voices in their writing. Explaining the significance of women's memoirs in the introductory paragraph of "The Lives of the Obscure," Woolf pays tribute to women writers:

> Not for what they did or for what they said, but for being themselves; for persisting, in spite of their invincible mediocrity, in writing their memoirs; for providing precisely that background, atmosphere, and standing of common earth

> which nourish people of greater importance and prevent them from shriveling to dry sticks or congealing to splendid pinnacles of inaccessible ice. (140)

Woolf claims that in England, as a patriarchal society, all issues about women have been recorded by men according to their desires and that women, as a consequence, have become "an odd monster" like "a worm winged like an eagle" (*A Room of One's Own* 56). Represented as goddesses in literature, women are absent, despised and neglected in reality. Despite such hostility, Woolf insists that women should endeavor to live autonomous lives and write on themselves.

In her feminist manifesto, *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf illustrates how women completely disappear in the literary history of England. She asks, "why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man [. . .] was capable of song or sonnet" (53) in the Elizabethan age. She imagines the life of Shakespeare's imaginary sister, Judith, possibly the most famous character in feminism. Judith, as much of a genius as her brother, did not have the opportunity to develop her gifts because every door was closed to women. As Woolf describes her, Judith is "as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world" as William, but "she was not sent to school" (60-61). She is betrothed, but, when she refuses to marry, she is severely beaten by her father. Ultimately, the outcome of her first adventure is a tragedy. Secretly departing for London as her brother had, she is ridiculed in front of the theatre. Subsequently, she commits suicide after finding herself pregnant with the child of the theatre manager who seduced her. Judith's genius never manifests itself while Shakespeare establishes his legacy in the English literary tradition. Woolf claims that if a woman had Shakespeare's genius she would have gone "crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (64) by the patriarchal society. Woolf asserts that, in England, women writers always aroused hostility in the nineteenth-century, and that hostility toward women is evident in every branch of artistic endeavor in the twentieth-century. For Woolf, the history that repressed and silenced Judith's voice still exists in her own time where another

Judith will live and die in obscurity.

Judith is the emblem of all the women whose obscure lives are yet to be recorded. Marcus points out that Woolf's fable of Shakespeare's sister is resonated with "the feminist model of women's 'silence,' the burial and repression of their gifts, and a literary history in which women's absence became constructed as a speaking silence" ("Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf" 220). Women's absence in history, ironically, speaks for the realities of their lives. Outraged and silenced by the violence of patriarchy, their lives demand to be recorded. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf says she feels "the pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of [. . .] all these infinitely obscure lives" (117) that remain to be recorded. Watching a "very ancient lady" (116) crossing the street with her daughter, whose unspoken life has entirely been vanished from her memory, Woolf calls on young women to write the lives of women yet unrecorded in history. In *A Room of One's Own*, she asks:

> at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? All these facts lie somewhere, presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it. (58)

Here, Woolf argues that women's lives should be restored and suggests that the students of a women's college "rewrite history" and thus add "a supplement to history" of women concealed in the background of great men (58).

Woolf traces obscure lives left in the oblique literary history of women's memoirs, letters, and journals. In their writings, women recorded their lives in their own ways, but these records were apt to be distorted or ignored by a patriarchal society. In her essays, Woolf endeavors to bring women back to life as they really were. In "Shelley and Elizabeth Hitchener" and "Eliza and Sterne," Woolf reconstructs women's lives. The women of interest in Woolf's essays had disappeared from a world dominated by men. Woolf retrieves their missing voices

out of their own writings and represents their lives in all its reality in her essays. The lives of obscure women that Woolf brings to light would form part of the long bridge of literary history through which they are all, like Judith, reincarnated.

In her biographical essays, Woolf was working on the lives of obscure women long before *A Room of One's Own*. In *Letters from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Elizabeth Hitchener* Woolf discovered Elizabeth Hitchener (1782-1822) in 1908. Shelley's letters to Hitchener had already been printed in 1890 by Thomas James Wise, but then privately printed. In 1908, they were issued once more in a "delightful shape" and "enriched" (174) with an introduction and with notes by Bertram Dobell on which Woolf wrote a review entitled "Shelley and Elizabeth Hitchener"[11]. While Dobell' *Letters* sheds new light on Shelley's life that was rather vague and unsubstantial, Woolf's essay shows the new appreciation of Elizabeth Hichener's life glimpsed in Shelley's letters. Reading *Letters* as they are edited and noted by Dobell, Woolf immediately sees "the rushing poet, whose wings grew stronger every day" (176) in Shelley's high-flown sentences. Woolf demonstrates in her essay that Shelley's letters to Elizabeth clearly exhibit Shelley's character that is a whimsical, egocentric and easily exalted spirit, and in this course Woolf dexterously represents in her brief, distinct and plain tone Elizabeth as plain and substantial in the askew space between Shelley and Shelley's Elizabeth.

Woolf illustrates that Shelley is always impetuous and unilateral in relation to Elizabeth. As Woolf reveals Shelley and accordingly reveals Elizabeth in his words, one might recognize that Elizabeth in his letters is Shelley's Elizabeth. For instance, when Elizabeth first knew Shelley in 1811, she was a twenty-eight-year-old schoolmistress, and he was nineteen, an impulsive passionate young boy. Elizabeth earned her living as a schoolmistress, which is, for Woolf, noble in itself, and yet teaching small children is, for Shelley, nobler than earning a living; for to teach is "'to propagate intellect [. . .] every error conquered, every mind enlightened, is so much added to the progression of human perfectibility'" (176). Woolf's realistic sense that making a living as a schoolmistress is significant in its own right

11) This article was published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, March 5, 1908.

strikingly contrasts with the romantic sensibility of Shelley. As her factual words are intermingled with Shelley's exalting words in the essay, Woolf implies that Elizabeth's situation is fluctuated drastically by Shelley's desire and whimsicality. Speaking for her, Woolf restores Elizabeth who was once swayed by the passionate young poet to a sensible trustworthy woman on the solid ground of the real life.

In "Eliza and Sterne" Woolf also criticizes the way in which woman is recorded and remembered in male-centered literary tradition. She brings Elizabeth Draper (1744-78) back to life from obscurity and rescues her from distortion of mail biographers. Arnold Wright and William Lutley Sclater published *Sterne's Eliza* in 1922, and Woolf wrote a review, "Eliza and Sterne," for *TLS*, published on December 14, 1922. As the titles of the biography and Woolf's essay imply, their points of view are quite different. While the biographers depict Elizabeth by focusing on her relation with Laurence Sterne (1713-68), Woolf consistently diminishes Sterne's impact on her life. Woolf's essay implies that, for her, the biographers' subject was Sterne rather than Elizabeth, whom they depict as a sympathetic figure, which was inappropriate. Elizabeth, dead for almost a century-and-a-half, turns up for the general reader of English biography in 1922 in two versions. One is manipulated by biographers as a background figure for a great man and the other is depicted more truthfully by a woman writer.

Most of all, Woolf criticizes the biographers' moral judgment of Eliza. For Woolf, the biographers wrongfully censure Eliza's morality in relation to Sterne at every point in the biography. Woolf claims that Eliza associated with Sterne for only three months in 1767, and, according to her letters, never loved him. Sterne was writing *The Sentimental Journey* in which he recorded Eliza's name and picture and "'where,' he said, 'they will remain – when you and I are at rest'" (349). Thus, by documenting Eliza in his book, his love would endure forever. *The Sentimental Journey* was published on February 27, 1768, and on March 18 of the same year, Sterne died. Sterne's love for Eliza, at the height of his fame and impending death, might be enough to incite a biographers' curiosity, but not at the expense of Eliza's entire life. As Woolf points out, readers of the biography in 1922 would be

delighted to sit next to Eliza at dinner, but she would not have been welcomed by high-class society in 1850. Woolf criticizes biographers who devoted all their energies to the morality of the subject as Victorian biographers did, and moreover, whose yardstick of morality was patriarchal, an anachronism. In "The Art of Biography," Woolf claims that a biographer's point of view is very significant because a biographer is bound by the facts. According to Woolf, the truths of facts are not permanent: "They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change. What was thought a sin is now known [. . .] to be perhaps a misfortune; perhaps a curiosity; perhaps neither one nor the other, but a trifling foible of no great importance one way or the other" (186). As a biographer deals with these kinds of variable facts, Woolf affirms that the biographer must testify to their diversity. Yet, even in the twentieth-century, Wright and Lutley remain behind the times with their one-sided Victorian morality.

Because of their patriarchal views, Wright and Lutley distort Eliza's life and frequently lose the subject of their biography. Woolf points out that when the subject of biography is an obscure woman, diversions from the subject occur easily and are frequently tolerated. Eliza is undoubtedly an obscure woman who would have been forgotten if not for the three months she was loved by Sterne. According to Woolf, Eliza's biographers too often distract the reader's attention from Eliza to "the antiseptic quality of wood ashes in the treatment of smallpox; to the different natures of the Hooka, the Calloon, and the Kerim Can; to the method, still in vogue, of hunting deer with cheetahs; and to the fact that one of Eliza's uncles was killed by a sack of caraway seeds falling on his head as he walked up St Mary-at-Hill in the year 1778" (347). As Woolf demonstrates, male biographers seem to consider these minutiae more important than Eliza is. Because Eliza is an obscure woman, "the white ants of Anjengo—'a peculiarly voracious breed,' who, not satisfied with devouring the 'bulk of the old archives' of a town which is at once the birthplace of Eliza and the seat of the pepper industry, have eaten away a much more precious material—the life of Eliza herself" (347). Here, Woolf compares the biographers to white ants preying on Eliza's life, and claims they

indiscriminately erased her life in favor of irrelevant trifles. Despite being the main figure in the biography, Eliza stands on the edge of the patriarchal arena of biography, from which she could slip off at any moment into nothingness.

In "Eliza and Sterne" Woolf rewrites Eliza's life by examining her letters, which the biographers refer to in *Sterne's Eliza*. Contrary to the biographers, Woolf does not make moral judgments. She represents Eliza's personality as impetuous, indifferent, and energetic—qualities that might ordinarily be inappropriate for a biography, but not for Woolf who find them interesting enough to explore and write about in her biographical essay. She reveals Eliza's personality through her letters. First, Woolf demonstrates that, unlike the biographers' persistent affirmation, Eliza never loved Sterne. In order to make her case, Woolf stresses their differences in age, social status, and personality. When they met for the first time, Stern was fifty-four and Eliza was twenty-two. Sterne was fully conscious of his reputation as a renowned writer, and he assured Eliza of her immortal fame by his words. However, Eliza did not fully understand what that meant for her. Moreover, she was "a woman of impulse" (348) married at the age of fourteen to Daniel Draper of Bombay. He was thirty-four, with several illegitimate children. According to Woolf, the biographers depict Eliza as a helpless woman whom Sterne once loved. However, Woolf regards Eliza as a woman with a multifarious personality. Eliza, regardless of Sterne's love, lived an untrammeled life of her own. At the end of the essay, Woolf suggests that Eliza might have been "moving in the highest circles of Bristol society at the time of her death" (350). Woolf complements the account of Eliza's life and equalizes her importance by transposing *Sterne's Eliza* into "Eliza and Sterne."

IV. Conclusion

While Woolf criticizes voluminous Victorian biographies with endless documentation of facts, she stands for a new biography, which amalgamates fact

and fiction, granite and rainbow. As Gualtieri points out, Woolf changed the idea of biography in 1927 by collapsing the boundaries between fact and fiction in "The New Biography." In 1939, she then advocated a more definite distinction between the two genres by classifying biography as a "craft" rather than an "art" in "The Art of Biography" (183). Gualtieri claims that Woolf's change of the opinion concerning biography is incongruent with her own practice in works such as *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*, where she attacks "the alleged objectivity of the historiographic enterprise" (356). However, there is not an essential difference between Woolf's views on biography in the two essays. Woolf maintains the conventional idea of genre that the truth of fact and the truth of fiction have their distinct boundaries. Moreover, for Woolf, the primary aim of biography is to convey the life itself, which is too complicated to be represented by an accumulation of facts. Fiction in biography matters, but it only plays a supplementary means to transmit the story of the life itself. It does this by sketching the inner life unrecorded by facts, and this is, ironically, the most crucial element in biography.

Woolf, more than any writer, knew how important for biography the truth of fact is. For Woolf, the artistic merit of biography lies in authentic facts. In "The Art of Biography," Woolf concludes that the sober fact the biographer deals with becomes "the creative fact; the fertile fact" (187) for the reader. This is the fact that excites the imagination, suggests itself, and engenders itself to the mind as when the reader reads a poem or a novel. In "'I am Christina Rossetti'" Woolf creates a vivid impression of Rossetti by the use of creative scenes. While reading Rossetti's biography she encounters the poet Christina Rossetti, who, in an incident at Mrs. Virtue Tebbs's party, comes to the middle in the room and introduces herself. Woolf concludes her essay with a description of how that scene engendered itself in her mind. Woolf cites Rossetti's poems in her essay and then addresses the poet as follows: "[To] return to your biography, had I been present when Mrs. Virtue Tebbs gave her party, and had a short elderly woman in black risen to her feet and advanced to the middle of the room, I should certainly have committed

some indiscretion—have broken a paper-knife or smashed a tea-cup in the awkward ardour of my admiration when she said, 'I am Christina Rossetti'" (559-60). This feeling is typical of the reason why for Woolf "the fascination of reading biographies is irresistible" (554). In spite of its formidable length and tedious details, the biography stimulates her imagination, by which she is able to appreciate the personality, the work, and the life of the female poet. Biography, for Woolf, is not only a testing ground for issues about art and life, but also a solid ground on which life has manifested itself in the form of art.

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Abstract

"Hanging up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners": Virginia Woolf's Biographical Essays

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While Virginia Woolf's reputation as one of the most prominent modernist and feminist writers is firmly established by her experimental novels, her tremendous contribution to essay writing has been overlooked until recently. It is surprising that Woolf's essays have received little critical attention considering that she was primarily an essayist and reviewer for the first two decades of her professional life and continued to write reviews in almost forty years as a literary journalist. The most remarkable aspect of her neglected essays is that many reveal her enthusiastic engagement with biographical writing. In these essays, Woolf notes that the biographer's art has entered a new phase to capture the essence of a personality as modern novels do. This paper examines several essays on biographical writing, "The New Biography," "The Art of Biography," "The Lives of the Obscure," "Shelley and Elizabeth Hitchener," and "Eliza and Sterne," to explore the ways in which Woolf advocates a new biography by criticizing her predecessors and evolving her own modern aesthetic position. These essays show that Woolf's experiments with biographical writing illustrate her attitudes toward life and writing and demonstrate her concerns about women and history, which, in turn, establish her as an uncompromising feminist and great modernist.

■ Key words : Virginia Woolf, essays, new biography, life-writing, "The Lives of the Obscure," "Shelley and Elizabeth Hitchener," "Eliza and Sterne"

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